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ABSTRACT

An overview of the theory behind field experience programs in the preservice teacher education program is presented, and the current status of such programs is discussed. The concept is defined as any situation where the preservice teacher has actual contact with pupils in a natural setting with a possibility of manipulating instructional variables. Reasons for and methods of initiating early field experience are examined. The growth of programs dealing with field experience in teacher preparation institutions is detailed, and descriptions of such programs at a number of schools are offered. Predictions for the future include the continued existence of field experience programs and a continued effort in research and evaluation to assess program effects. (MJB)

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The Emergence of Early Field Experiences

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The Emergence of Early Field Experiences

I. Definition of Early Field Experience

Early field experiences encompass a variety of situations ranging from passive observation of public school teaching to active participation in tutoring, grading papers, accompanying classes on trips, arranging children's art shows, participating in school science fairs and music festivals and actual classroom teaching. It is commonly felt that peer teaching, videotaping, modularization, simulations, and micro-teaching involve a degree of futility in attempting to duplicate actual teaching situations.

The succinct definition of early-field experience could be given as any situation where the pre-service teacher has actual

contact with pupils in a natural setting with a possibility of manipulating instructional variables. Ediger recommends experiences outside the public school setting such as in the work of Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts and 4-H Clubs. Interaction with parents and other lay persons in the public school is important, he feels, as well as pupil contact. Students begin field experience by performing low-level jobs and working gradually into higher-level activities.

II. Reasons for Initiating Early Field Experience

With the current emphasis on producing better teachers in hopes of improving education for children, professional education is undergoing scrutiny. One area of concern to educators is the change from positive to negative in attitudes towards school expressed by most student teachers. Another point educators consider is the fact that the co-operating teacher has more influence on a student teacher than any other person in the teacher education program; therefore students need more exposure to different teachers and teaching modes in order to be better prepared to meet changing demands of the profession. Proposed and actual changes in curricular format of teacher preparation programs to include pre-service field experiences are the trend in many education departments currently.

Many problems in teaching can be identified early in a live setting which cannot be duplicated on campus. This early involvement should minimize difficulties in student teaching.

Silvino asserted that "Research to date suggests that direct experiences are more effective than lecture or non-field techniques." Another rationale for early field experience to support the traditional student teaching program is the importance of practical training in making realistic career decisions.

The importance of positive self-perception in order for students to deal effectively with problems in student teaching is recognized by Jordan who found that college students felt a "significant personal chasm between faculty and students" resulting in low self-perception in students. Jordan felt more interpersonal experiences for pre-service teachers are needed rather than emphasis on methodological, historical courses. Some teacher education programs assign students to a member of the faculty for the entire pre-service program of two years to unify the field experiences with weekly seminars and course work.

Another emphasis in education of investigating the actual process of teaching is finding practical application in early field experience programs. Some educators have developed instruments for studying verbal and nonverbal dimensions of classroom interaction patterns to help the teacher candidate "focus his attention on those aspects of his behavior which he can alter or develop within...(his) teacher-education-experience program," according to Kysilka. The purpose of these instruments or systematic analyses of teaching behavior

is not to program a student into a particular teaching model but to sensitize the pre-service teacher to his own performance.

Reasons for initiating early field experience begin with a concern for development of practical skills through early experiences with different teachers and modes of teaching. Realistic career decisions, positive attitudes, self perception, and systematic analysis of teaching behavior are other interests which have contributed to the development of early field experiences for prospective teachers.

III. Methods of Initiating Early Field Experience

Objectives for the entire teacher education program must be established in order to incorporate field experiences in an organized, sequential manner. Steinkellner identified two important steps in successful implementation of these experiences: Selection of objectives that can best be met in the field and maintaining detailed records of each student's field work. Overbeck and Quisenberry expanded the participation by listing eight categories ranging from management of the learning environment to developing professionalism.

Discussions between college instructors, building principals and/or department heads of the program and establishment of objectives should precede the careful selection of classroom teachers--an essential factor in success of the program. Since practicing professionals who supervise participants in clinical settings generally receive no specialized preparation for assuming the role of mentor,

discussions between the classroom teacher and college instructor are necessary while the students are participating in the program.

One innovative recruitment approach at Emory University in Atlanta, GA, involves careful recruitment of full-time teachers to a professional affiliation with the university as clinical supervisors to plan and provide in-school experiences for pre-service teachers. Renumeration for services is given, and these teachers are enrolled in graduate studies at the university.

As early as the freshman year in some universities such as Brooklyn College in New York, students work in public schools 2 days per week and attend seminars on alternate days. In some other universities Van Patten discovered a trend to include preprofessional experiences in the first course in education. In most instances early field experiences in public schools have been gaining in popularity.

Preparation or orientation of the college students for the field experience, regardless of the type, should include explanations of objectives, evaluation procedures, school setting, professional behavior and responsibility and commitment to field experiences. Feedback once students are working in the field should be systematically provided in a manner that encourages the individual to assume increasing personal responsibility for future professional growth, according to Warner.

Lines of communication must be kept open by the total group (college teachers, public school teachers, and college students and school administrators). The field experience must be monitored constantly to determine pupil progress, and necessary modifications in the program should be made.

IV. Growth in Schools with Early Field Experience

Clark stated that, "In contrast with the centralization of sites for professional training in other fields, state-approved preservice teacher preparation programs exist in 1,367 four-year institutions of higher education in this country--nearly three out of four colleges and universities." Smith gives early field experiences as one of the most innovative trends in current teacher education. It is apparent that research on aspects of field-based experiences is just getting underway.

Van Patten sent a questionnaire to 78 U.S. universities with 68 responses returned which "Indicated a growing trend to rethink aims, goals, and objectives of the first course in education to include preprofessional experiences. Participation and active involvement in a school setting was increasingly sought...Although far from being universal, a commonality of the first course is pre-professional experience in practice, planning, and intent. A number of responses indicated field experiences were implemented at the urging of their students."

V. Description of Specific Programs

Many institutions which are engaged in training teachers have initiated field experiences that precede student teaching. From a review of the literature, it would appear that the areas of mathematics and science have more field-based programs than other teaching concentrations.

At the University of Missouri, college students taught one hour daily for a period of eight weeks in a junior high school classroom where they taught groups composed of three to six 7th or 8th grade students. A similar program was initiated at the University of Illinois for students in an elementary mathematics methods course who taught at a public elementary school. A slightly different approach was used at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. There the students enrolled in a secondary mathematics methods course and concurrently in an action seminar. In the first phase of the seminar, students prepared a packet of study materials for use by an individual high school student. The second phase allowed the college students to take their materials into the classroom to work with junior high students. There also was an opportunity for prospective mathematics teachers to have field experiences at East Carolina University. Such programs were being used at many other teacher training institutions for prospective mathematics teachers.

Similar programs for future science teachers are in effect at many institutions at the present time, and most of the interaction with the public school students is initiated by

teachers of college methods courses. At the University of Connecticut an effective model for involving undergraduate science and social studies methods students in elementary schools is underway. At East Carolina University the Department of Physics had been aware of problems that physics teachers had when student teaching. With support from a National Science Foundation grant, they offered pre-service training. At the College of Saint Teresa in Winona, Minnesota, several science faculty members planned improvements in the elementary science teacher education program by developing modules which the students in methods course would teach in elementary schools preceding their student teaching.

The University of Iowa is developing a series of field-based clinical experiences for science education majors. The 4 year program now is centered around a series of clinical experiences in the schools. Students have the opportunity to interact with a variety of teaching models and styles. It was felt that a series of clinical experiences providing a wider range of contacts with teacher models in different classroom environments was best for future teachers. Each teacher intern designed, produced and evaluated a self-instructional module which was to be taught. The students also demonstrate at least 2 modern strategies in elementary science in their teaching.

At Western Washington College, a pre-service course in elementary science teaching methods provides mini-teaching in the local public schools as well as skills in using science

packets. The prospective teachers work with a small group of students for one-half hour per day for a week or two.

According to Gray, "Some colleges are moving the reading methods course from the college classroom to an elementary school so that students may obtain first hand practical experience along with theory." Subsequently, the students gain experience tutoring children with reading problems and observing in elementary classrooms.

A similar plan was instituted at the University of Texas because of many complaints that courses in reading methods were not meeting the needs of future teachers. To change this attitude, grade school students were brought into the university classroom for tutoring by reading majors. The tutoring later was moved into the public schools.

Many departments of home economics have instituted early field experiences for their students akin to the one at Penn State University where home economics majors are assigned several weeks of practice teaching in elementary schools during their sophomore year.

Another area of concentration using field experiences is that of English. At the University of Texas, students taught in a junior high school for 15 minute sessions. The expected results were that this experience would help them to focus on the task of teaching and become more concerned about learning how to teach.

At Southern Illinois University-Carbondale,

there is opportunity for education majors to engage in early field experience for two semesters prior to student teaching. At the first level of field experience, the students from all elementary and secondary programs are required to participate in a classroom in a public school for 3 clock hours per week. This experience is one in which the students observe a classroom teacher, aid in any way commensurate with their level of ability at that stage of development and do some individual group work as well as present a mini-lesson.

The second phase of the sequence is voluntary for most education majors, During the second semester in the public schools, the student spends 3 hours per week for each hour of university credit. Since these students have more expertise than those in the first section of the program, many are given small groups to work with on a continuing basis. They also are expected to perform at a higher level of involvement than the beginners in the program. It has been found that since such a program has been initiated at SIU-C, the students felt much more prepared to undertake the student teaching semester, more at ease and more capable to handle difficulties that arise.

A unique twist to the entire idea of field based experiences is the one at Indiana University for undergraduates in the Early Childhood Education Program. This is an approach that invites parents to participate in the training of education students. A sequence of 4 teaching-learning experiences takes

the place of the traditional student teaching semester. The students participate in a nursery school experience, visit regularly in a home where there is an infant under age one year, work in a kindergarten and finally are placed in a primary grade.

The feedback from all of the programs studied has indeed been positive. Of prime value is the fact that early field experience gives students a working knowledge for their own feelings about being suited for teaching and their chosen grade level, Most students felt that the experience was meaningful, worthwhile and helpful. It also gave realistic preparation for student teaching and a career in the classroom. Teacher trainees were exposed to new ideas and cooperating teachers gained new ideas as well. Field experiences enabled the education majors to decide if they wanted to stay in teaching. The students who had early field experiences were usually more open, more ready to assume the role of the teacher and more resilient and skillful in evaluating their experiences. Feedback from both undergraduates and teachers in public schools has been favorable. The programs have been well received by both the schools and the college students. The students gained a growing confidence in teaching as well as an increased awareness of problems in the teaching process. In other words, such procedures help to establish a bridge between the university training program and the public schools. Such interaction can only promote better teaching.

Certainly last but not least, such involvement on the part of many university teacher trainees has been beneficial for the students in the public schools since it allows for much individualized instruction.

VI. Predictions For the Future

It is always a risky venture to predict future trends in education as well as in any other area. However, it is a rather well-documented fact that the training of future teachers has been more in the realm of entrenching the students in the status quo rather than on the cutting edge of advancing the profession. There are many pressures on teacher educators to sustain a meaningful change in teacher preparation. Therefore, it appears that the early field experience section of the training is here to stay at least for the foreseeable future.

Instead of fewer contact hours with students in classrooms, teacher trainees probably will be spending more time there. Not only will they be working with specific content areas in tutoring or teaching, but they probably will be having more practicum experiences in classrooms. These will involve hands-on work from general methods and techniques courses in addition to the more specialized ones.

Insufficient research has been done at this point to prove conclusively that students who have participated in field-based experiences prior to student teaching are superior

teachers. Additional sound research evidence and experimentation on this phase of teacher education needs to be done. But from the findings made so far, it appears that field-based experiences do make for a more effective teacher education program. The experimental programs and innovations connected to field experiences offer a great deal of promise for the future of teacher education.

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